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## **The Trokosi Tradition In Ghana: The Silencing of a Religion**

BY RHONDA MARTINEZ

*Abstract: When does tradition and religion infringe upon human rights and who has the right to impose restrictions on them? Slavery is still an ongoing phenomenon that should no longer be denied. Trokosi, still being practiced today, is a relatively unknown African religion in which young girls are sexually enslaved to pay for crimes committed by their families. This paper highlights the terrible tradition of trokosi in order to bring public awareness to its three-hundred-year practice. Through the examination of a variety of secondary sources, definitions of slavery and explanations of the trokosi traditions are first established. Next, debates for and against maintaining the trokosi tradition are examined, followed by a look at some of the pros and cons of activism against it. By spotlighting this centuries-old practice, perhaps we can bring it to an end.*

### *Trokosi Tradition*

The trokosi religion, which is practiced in Ghana, West Africa, enslaves girls as young as five years old. Known as trokosi slaves, the girls are forced into hard labor for several years and are also required to perform sexual acts with fetish priests. Parents give their daughters to the shrine in order to compensate for a crime committed by a family member. Local religious belief dictates that misfortune will follow any family that fails to sacrifice its daughters in this way. One fetish priest from the Volta region explains, "People are brought here to appease the gods for crimes committed in their family. The girls must be virgins. The gods will not accept girls who are not virgins."<sup>1</sup> Trokosi has been practiced for the last 300 years and is said to have voodoo affiliations.<sup>2</sup> The Ghanaian government outlawed forced labor and slavery in 1998 but, trokosi, or "slave of the gods," is currently being practiced and many of the sex slaves are held in captivity today. Moreover, the discovery of shrines housing trokosis in Ghana has not led to any arrests. Human rights activists are outraged that the Ghanaian government is not taking swift actions to abolish the trokosi religion. Trokosi is sustained by strong Ghanaian religious beliefs, thus it is unlikely to vanish even if faced with government legislation. Unless drastic action is taken against it, trokosi religion could become a silent slavery issue.

### ***Definition of Slavery***

The definition of slavery is fiercely debated amongst academics. The term "slavery" conjures up images of black African men being bought, sold, or owned by wealthy white landowners, as well as of African men who were brought to America on slave ships whom were forced to work on plantations and beaten on a regular basis. Nevertheless, there are other forms of slavery besides chattel, and academics cannot agree on a single definition of slavery. "Slavery in Africa," by Suzanne Meirs

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<sup>1</sup> Lesley Saunders, "Ghana: Africa's Sex Slaves Starting to Fight Back," *The Ottawa Citizen* (November 11, 1995): H9.

<sup>2</sup> Deann Alford, "Sex Slave's Slow Freedom." *Christianity Today* 49, no.2 (February 2005): 22.

and Igor Kopytoff, presents the argument that “slaves” have one thing in common: all are strangers in a new setting, be it a new kin group, community, region, or even a country.”<sup>3</sup> Meirs and Kopytoff explain that a “slave” could be anyone, regardless of their culture or sex, who is not accepted in their community or who is considered to be an outcast.<sup>4</sup> They also describe a “slave” as someone who may have experienced a reduction in social status. Meirs and Kopytoff believe it is impossible to give one definition to the term “slavery” because it may consist of many institutions, such as adoption, marriage, and parentage.<sup>5</sup> They suggest that “slavery” is a system under which individuals may acquire other men and women to be used and controlled as total persons, rather than merely to use their specific services.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, slavery does not only consist of black African men but may consist of those from various cultures and could also be women and children. Meirs and Kopytoff also explain that slavery does not necessarily revolve around labor or on revenue generated from labor.

The definition of slavery put forth by Meirs and Kopytoff accurately describes the trokosi practice. Trokosis are entered into new settings and are strangers to the shrines upon their arrival and are used and controlled by the priests. One trokosi recalls her entrance into the shrine, “Nothing was said to me before I was taken to the shrine. Beads were placed around my knees and ankles and then my family left. I started weeping when I realized that I’d been given to the priest. I cried until some of the women, also trokosis, came to tell me I could not go back, that they’d been there for many years.”<sup>7</sup> According to the Meirs and Kopytoff definition of slavery, the trokosis are

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<sup>3</sup> Robert O. Collins, “Slavery in Africa,” in *Problems in African History: The Precolonial Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993): 264.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>7</sup> Angela Robson, “The Chosen Ones: Slavery in the Name of God; An Ancient Cult is Alive and Well in Ghana, taking girls as Young as Two and Offering Them as Wives to Appease Their Deities.” *The Independent* (UK), (Oct 26, 2006): 26.

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slaves even after their release from the shrines because of their lack of acceptance. Trokosis continue to be outcasts after their years of hard labor are over and are never accepted into society. As soon as they are given to the shrines, whatever status the trokosis or their children may have held in the future is immediately lost. Meirs and Kopytoff's ideas of slavery would define trokosis as slaves rather than as "priestesses" as referred to by pro-trokosi supporters.

Additionally, in the article, "Female Sexual Slavery: Understanding the International Dimensions of Women's Oppression," Kathleen Barry describes female enslavement as whether a woman or girl can get out of a particular situation."<sup>8</sup> She also explains, "female sexual slavery to be present in all situations where women or girls cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual exploitation and physical abuse."<sup>9</sup> Her definition labels trokosis as slaves as well, but in a different manner than Meirs and Kopytoff, as she does not insinuate that slaves are outcasts in their community. Instead, she insists that slaves may be able to change their status if given the opportunity to escape out of slavery. Barry's definition of slavery, like Meirs and Kopytoff's, mentions nothing about the labor or the economic aspects involved. They believe physical labor has nothing to do with what a slave is, nor does it determine the status of an individual. Nevertheless, Barry's definition of slavery could be true for all slaves and not only for women or trokosi slaves since male slaves weren't always in positions to get out of their conditions of slavery.

Other historians define slavery differently from Meirs, Kopytoff's, and Barry's definitions, in which the slaves were defined as property and were also defined solely by their economic contributions or physical labor. Paul Lovejoy believes slaves, in contrast to Meirs and Kopytoff, were outcasts because of their cultural surroundings, and he also believes

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Barry, "Female Sexual Slavery: International Dimensions of Women's Oppression," *Human Rights Quarterly* 3, no.2 (1981): 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

slavery depended on the labor involved. Lovejoy believes that all slavery resulted after violent situations, such as war, which is not the case for trokosi slaves. He states in the article "Transformations in Slavery" that, "Slavery was virtually always initiated through violence that reduced the status of a person from a condition of freedom and citizenship to a condition of slavery."<sup>10</sup> Lovejoy claims slaves were "instruments of work" and he insists that the status of slaves was always hereditary, which is not true for the newly sacrificed trokosis but could depict those born into shrine slavery. However, Lovejoy's definition could apply to various types of slavery other than the trokosi oppression. His definition of slavery would be most suited to describe the slavery seen on plantations or chattel slaves, as seen in the early Americas. In the article, "Women and Slavery: The Popularity of Female Slave Trade in Africa, It's Causes and Consequences," Begum Guvenc states of female slavery, "Whichever definition is used, the slave is involuntarily servile, has a marginal position within the social unit, and is subject to the control of another."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the various definitions given by historians and scholars could all relate to the various forms of slavery because each form consisted of having various traits. For example, chattel slavery, as opposed to trokosi slavery, have different and even contradictory definitions of one another but are nonetheless still forms of slavery. The trokosi system is a form of modern slavery that many historians and scholars have yet to define. However, the definition of slavery given by Meirs and Kopytoff could accurately define the characteristics involved in the trokosi religion.

### ***Origins and Explanation of Trokosi***

The trokosi religion originated in Togo and Benin as a war ritual in the 1600s and consisted of warriors visiting religious

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<sup>10</sup> Collins, 278.

<sup>11</sup> Begum Guvenc, "Women and Slavery: The Popularity of Female Slave Trade in Africa, It's Causes and Consequences," *Journal of Academic Studies* (2005): 221.

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shrines where they offered women to the war gods in exchange for victory and a safe homecoming.<sup>12</sup> The word trokosi comes from the Ewe words “tro,” meaning deity, and “kosi” meaning female slave.<sup>13</sup> Trokosi is also referred to as “wife of the gods” because all of the trokosi slaves are considered to be the wives of the priests that own them, and the priests’ duty is to act as mediators to the gods. Moreover, modern trokosi consists of giving a virgin girl to a shrine to make amends for a crime committed by a family member and is being practiced today in Africa’s Volta region, which includes parts of Ghana, Togo, and Benin.<sup>14</sup> The crimes committed that require sacrificing a young virgin girl into a shrine vary and may consist of murder, stealing, and rape. Those who practice trokosi believe family members will suffer misfortunes, such as disease and death, if they don’t sacrifice their virgin daughters to the shrine. Mercy Senahe, a liberated trokosi, claimed her grandmother had been blamed for theft and Mercy recalls that members of her family started falling ill and dying.<sup>15</sup> For more offensive crimes, such as homicide, some families must send generation after generation of virgin girls to the shrine.<sup>16</sup>

Once the trokosi enters the shrine, they are faced with hard labor and the priest forces the trokosis to work long hours, such as fifteen hour work days, performing various duties that include cleaning, cooking, carrying water, and farming. A priest may keep a trokosi slave for her entire life, depending on the severity of the crime her relative committed.<sup>17</sup> The trokosis are not compensated for any of their work and whatever earnings they make goes to the priest. This characteristic makes trokosi slaves beneficial for production and economic purposes. Today, trokosi shrines are run like businesses in which material goods and money are paramount.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah C. Aird, “Ghana’s Slave to the Gods.” *Human Right’s Brief* (2002), 2 <http://wcl.american.edu/> (Accessed on May 10, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Robson, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Alford, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Robson, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Aird, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

The trokosis are not provided with any clothing, food, or other necessities by the shrine; all essential requirements are to be provided by the trokosi's parents. However, in most cases the parents are too afraid to visit their daughters because of the evil spirits they believe surround the shrine, as well as their daughters. Other parents live in excessive poverty and are unable to provide the necessary food or clothing needed for their daughters to survive. As a result, many of the trokosi slaves suffer from malnourishment and are faced with starvation on a regular basis, which in many cases results in death. If a trokosi slave happens to die inside of the shrine before her time of repent is up, the parents are responsible for providing another virgin girl as a replacement. If they do not, their family will still suffer the trokosi curse even after their daughter died as a result of life inside of the shrine.

Trokosi slaves experience sexual humiliation during their time in the shrine in addition to hard labor. After the first menstrual cycles of the trokosis, the priest will continually rape the girls at any time of his choosing. If the girls become pregnant, they are forbidden from receiving medical attention during their pregnancies, and they receive no guidance by the priest. Patience Akope, a former trokosi slave, tells of her pregnancy inside of the shrine, "The priest did not allow me to visit the clinic for prenatal care or go to the hospital. Throughout the pregnancy, I had to fend for myself."<sup>19</sup> Those born into the shrines become trokosi slaves and belong to the priests as well. One fetish priest admitted to having 64 wives and 300 children.<sup>20</sup> The number of children a priest has determines his status in the community, so the priests purposely try to impregnate the trokosi slaves.<sup>21</sup> The trokosi slaves are also denied access to education. A former Trokosi said at a National Dissemination Workshop on the Study of Trokosi

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<sup>19</sup> Nirit Ben-Ari, "Liberating Girls From Trokosi-Campaign Against Ritual Servitude in Ghana." *Africa Recovery* 15, no.4 (December 2001): 26.

<sup>20</sup> Saunders, H9.

<sup>21</sup> Aird, 2.



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Practice in Ghana in 2008, “My generation and the generation before mine missed out in education.”<sup>22</sup>

If a slave attempts to escape and is caught, she is severely beaten by the priest. If a slave runs away to her parents, they reject her out of fear of becoming cursed by evil spirits and immediately bring her back to the shrine. However, many trokosis are too afraid to try to run away and do not want to bring misfortune to their families. They believe their parents had no other option but to sacrifice them to save their family members. As Susan Aird explains in her article, “Ghana’s Slave to the Gods,” “Many people also fear former trokosi slaves, believing they bring misfortune. When community members easily can identify escaped or newly released slaves by their trokosi names or scars from beatings, they may reject them just as the former slaves’ own families already have.”<sup>23</sup> Local superstition and social stigma serve to create conditions under which the trokosi are unlikely to even attempt escape.

Mostly females are given to the shrines and it is only in rare circumstances that males are given. However, there are no accounts given by male slaves about what shrine life is like and human rights activists look at trokosi as a female slavery issue. A 17-year-old daughter of a trokosi and a fetish priest who had served in a shrine were asked why only girls and not boys had to suffer for the misdeeds of their families.<sup>24</sup> The explanation for the preference of girl slaves is due to the notion that girls are less likely to be as defiant and rebellious as boys may be, and therefore are less likely to escape. Female slaves also have a higher tendency to obey the priests’ orders, especially because most of the girls enter the shrines at such a young age that obeying the priest is what they become accustomed to. Young girls are especially valued by the trokosi religion because they are easily controlled. Moreover, their productive and reproductive labor is an important source of support for the

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<sup>22</sup> “Ghana: Let’s Unite Against Trokosi.” *All Africa* (July 25, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Aird, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Yakin Erturk, “Ghana: “Trokosi”-Ritual Servitude and Sexual Abuse.” *UN Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, It’s Causes and Consequences* (February 21, 2008): 15-16.

priests of the trokosi shrines.<sup>25</sup> A young male trokosi, in contrast, may grow to detest orders given by another male figure and decide to protest or retaliate. Females are also entered into the shrines because the priests prefer females as opposed to males for sexual purposes, which has been one of the primary reasons for the preference of female slavery throughout history.

The cruelties that the trokosi slaves experience in the shrines cause them to suffer lifelong negative effects. In her article, "Sex Slaves' Slow Freedom," Deann Alford claims, "All trokosis are unskilled illiterates. Families often reject the girls. Without intervention, girls fall into drugs, crime, and prostitution."<sup>26</sup> The ex-slaves are cursed throughout the rest of their lives, which makes them outcasts to their community and unmarriageable since no man or woman wants to go near them. The ex-trokosis are unable to support themselves due to the fact that they lack an education, social skills, and occupational training. The trokosi are familiarized with their lives inside the shrine, and it is the only place where they feel accepted after being shunned by their families and the community. For this reason, the trokosi often want to return to the shrine after their release. Angela Dwamena-Aboagye, a Ghanaian lawyer and women's rights advocate states of the trokosi practice, "It's slavery, pure and simple. It violates every fundamental right. It's a step backwards for women."<sup>27</sup> Not only is trokosi a form of slavery but it is also a form of child abuse that the priests and Ghanaian government are failing to address. Currently, more than 3,300 trokosis have been freed, but some 5,000 or more remain enslaved in Ghana alone.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sandra E. Greene, "Modern Trokosi and the 1807 Abolition in Ghana: Connecting Past and Present." *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no.4 (October 2009): 273.

<sup>26</sup> Alford, 22.

<sup>27</sup> "Ghana Debates Use of Shrine Bondage." *The Salt Lake Tribune* (July 8, 1999), A7.

<sup>28</sup> Alford, 22.

### ***Silencing of Trokosi***

Many activists are pressuring the Ghanaian government to put a stop to the enslavement of trokosis but no changes have been made thus far. The Ghanaian government outlawed forced labor and slavery in 1998, yet trokosi priests still practice the religion without fear of legal repercussions. No arrests have been made by Ghanaian officials, and sexual enslavement of women and children continues to be overlooked by the government and by the community. The trokosi religion has been practiced for several centuries, but only recently has it raised serious issues about human rights violations. Fiaga Togbe Kwao, chief of the Mepe Traditional Area said, “Changing centuries old customs and practices is not easy.”<sup>29</sup> The human rights abuses involved in the trokosi religion have been and might remain a silent issue.

One reason for the silence on trokosi is that it has been overlooked for such a great length of time that it has become customary to those exposed to it. Kathleen Barry explains, “As long as female sexual slavery, in any form, is culturally validated or ignored, it will remain invisible as a form of slavery and, therefore, will not be recognized as a violation of women’s human rights.”<sup>30</sup> Customs that have been taking place for several centuries, such as the trokosi religion, may seem normal to the community that practices the religion. The religion also remains silent due to the secrecy and fear that surrounds it. Some of the government officials are superstitious and believe if they reprimand any of the trokosi practitioners that their lives may be in danger by the forces surrounding the shrines. Mark Wisdom, Executive Director of the Fetish Slaves Liberation Movement, stated, “Before I started the trokosi campaign I realized that everyone was afraid to either raise his voice against this cruel religious custom or even mention it in public, for fear of being killed by the shrine powers.”<sup>31</sup> If

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<sup>29</sup> Ben-Ari, 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Wisdom, *The Trokosi System*. (Accra-North, Ghana: Mercury Press, August 2001), 10.

residents of Ghana are unwilling or fearful to talk about trokosi, then the human rights abuses will continue to be ignored by the world community.

The trokosi system may also be a silent issue because Ghana is traditionally a male-dominated society. In the institution of marriage in Ghana, the woman is considered to be the property of her husband.<sup>32</sup> Women are discriminated against and are unable to hold any positions of authority in their society. The shrine owners are and have always been owned by males, which is why trokosis are predominately females. Since women in Ghana are seen as objects in their community, it is unlikely that the Ghanaian government sees the enslavement issue with any relevance. It is noted that the situation of African women today is no different than it was during the colonial era.<sup>33</sup> The marginalized status of women decreases the likelihood of any government or activist intervention against trokosi.

Furthermore, the trokosi will most likely stay silent because the history of women in slavery has always been a silent issue according to many historians and scholars. Historians have seldom written about the issue of female slavery. The reason the issue of female slavery has been largely omitted from the historical narrative is due to the fact that most of their labor occurred behind closed doors where they were rarely seen by anyone other than their owners. Female slaves are generally domestic servants, while male slavery generally takes place outdoors, as seen in plantation slavery. The trokosi slaves also live in seclusion, which helps make their enslavement silent and unknown. Angela Robson explains, "We were refused permission to take photos of the Kilkor shrines. Later, the photographer was told in Kilkor and other trokosi-practicing villages in Ghana, that the Afrikania Mission

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<sup>32</sup> Apollo Rwomire, *African Women and Children: Crisis and Response*. (Wesport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001), 97.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Kwame Ameh, "Human Rights, Gender and Religious Practices: the Trokosi System in West Africa," In *Pan-African Issues in Crime and Justice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, May 2004), 32.

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had banned all trokosi women and girls from giving statements or being photographed.”<sup>34</sup>

The issue of female slavery also remains silent due to the lack of education. For example, the trokosi slaves are illiterate and cannot write about their experiences inside of the shrines. The only people to tell of the trokosi slaves' lives inside of the shrines are those who interview them after they are released. The fact that female slavery remains a silent issue contributes to the popular misconception that the majority of slaves throughout history have been male; in actuality, the majority has been female. The preference for female slaves derives from their sexual uses and ability to reproduce, thus providing additional labor. Another suggestion made by anti-trokosi activists is to give cattle to the priests instead of sacrificing young girls into the shrine. In response, a priest proclaimed, “You can't have sex with a cow.”<sup>35</sup> Throughout history, female slaves were used primarily for sexual purposes and the priest's response to the suggestion proves that Ghana persists to have primitive characteristics.

The trokosi slaves could also be overlooked for the simple reason that many people refuse to accept that slavery still exists and believe slavery is an issue of the past because they are not exposed to it in their everyday lives. There is a lack of awareness that slavery still exists in parts of the world and possibly in their own countries or maybe even in their hometowns. Nevertheless, the trokosi religion is an important issue to examine because of the history of silences surrounding the institution of female slavery.

### ***Debates About Trokosi***

Many anti-trokosi activists, like Ms. Florence Butegwa of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Romana Cacchioli of ANTI-Slavery International, believe enslaving young girls against their will is a crime that should be stopped. Butegwa argues, “The government should move quickly to

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<sup>34</sup> Robson, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Aird, 5.

arrest and jail those who are still perpetuating this evil and dehumanizing practice of keeping and abusing young innocent girls confined in these shrines.” However, some trokosi supporters think that critics are only trying to westernize the African culture and believe campaigns against trokosi are examples of religious persecution.<sup>36</sup> Osofo Kofi Ameve, a spiritual leader in the African Renaissance Mission, a council formed by fetish priests to preserve the trokosi religion, insists, “Girls are never forced to enter shrine life; neither are they subjected to harsh treatment, unpaid labor or sexual abuse.” His statement is false since there are numerous accounts of former slaves, as well as accounts from the parents of trokosis, explaining their life of servitude and how they were given to the shrine by their parents. “A trokosi slave, Adzo, received scant food or clothing, no education, and regular beatings. Her duties included hard farm labor, cleaning the shrine grounds, and carrying water. After puberty, her duties included sex with the shrine’s fetish priests.”<sup>37</sup> As a result, Adzo died of the harsh treatment she received inside of the shrine, but no remorse is expressed by the priests or by the government in such circumstances.

The African Renaissance Mission justifies the religion by suggesting that the girls are role models for saving their families from detrimental events and that they are looked up to by the community. However, as previously mentioned, accounts given by liberated trokosis suggest that the girls are not well received by their communities. Moreover, the trokosis are subjected to harsh and inhumane treatment. An ex-trokosi states, “The priest was 50 years old. If we refused to do the work he gave us - chopping wood, working in the fields, preparing food - he would beat us.”<sup>38</sup> Another former slave experienced extreme hardship, “For more than 14 years, she was overworked, partially starved, barred from attending

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<sup>36</sup> United States Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor), *Country Reports of Human Rights Practices-Ghana* (February 25, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Alford, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Robson, 26.

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school, beaten and from around age 12 raped by the 90 year old priest who fathered her first child.”<sup>39</sup> Despite these accounts, advocates of trokosi are free to practice their religion, as the Ghanaian Constitution states, “all persons have the right to practice any religion and to manifest said practice.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, supporters of trokosi argue that banning the religion would be a form of religious persecution.

While many anti-trokosi activists believe necessary actions are needed to ban the trokosi practice, no activists have suggested what would be an effective way to stop the enslavement that has been taking place for the last 300 years. Anti-activists are relying on the Ghanaian government to resolve the enslavement issue, but there has been no discussion by activists of what might happen if further actions are taken and what the possible consequences might be. The Ghanaian government believes persecuting those practicing trokosi might cause a “popular backlash” in the Volta region of Ghana and the government officials fear “spiritual consequences”. Also, Butegwa suggests that trokosi might go into another form or underground if persecutions are made, which would make curtailing the religion much harder.<sup>41</sup> To add to the impossibility of stopping the practice of a 300 year-old religion, there exists the possibility that banning the practice could cause economic devastation in the community, as well as increase the likelihood of violent protests by priests and superstitious families.

Human rights activists have also tried to educate the Ghanaian government about the difficulty of progression in a slaveholding country. Slavery keeps villages in bondage and keeps the economy poor.<sup>42</sup> A country that produces thousands of illiterate inhabitants is more likely to remain culturally and economically underdeveloped. Yet, the Ghanaian government remains unbothered that trokosi is taking place in their country and chooses to overlook the issue. Vincent Azumah, a

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<sup>39</sup> Salt Lake Tribune, A7.

<sup>40</sup> Aird, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>42</sup> Alford, 22.

Ghanaian journalist states, “It has been going on for ages, and many women have died in the system, knowing nothing but the shrine life. They have not been able to help Ghana grow.”<sup>43</sup> Trokosi supporters, however, believe the religion is necessary to eliminate crime in the region. Priests believe family members are less likely to commit crime because they would not want their relatives to suffer the trokosi curse. However, many trokosis do not know the relative who they are being sacrificed for and the person who commits the crime may not know the relative who will be enslaved for his or her misdeed, which makes them less likely to feel remorse. There is a higher probability that individuals who have no children will commit crimes. It is unlikely that parents would want to sacrifice their own children for crimes they willingly commit.

### ***Pros and Cons of Activist Involvement***

Since human rights groups started pressuring the issue of the human rights violations involved in the trokosi practice, many priests have started to deny that the trokosis are in fact slaves. The most recent annual report on religious freedom from the US Department of State proclaims, “There is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is a systematic part of the practice.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, many trokosis are now prohibited from giving interviews or having their pictures taken, as priests do not want outsiders to know what takes place inside of the shrines. In addition, traditionalist groups organize press conferences, circulate defamatory information to discredit the work of the abolitionists, and have even tried to disrupt abolitionist press conferences.<sup>45</sup> The pro-trokosi activists are making it more challenging for the trokosis to escape enslavement. Several anti-trokosi activists have also put themselves in harm’s way as a result of their efforts in abolishing the religion. Many trokosi supporters are angry their religion is being scrutinized in a negative manner. Aird states, “In fact, resistance has proved so

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<sup>43</sup> Salt Lake Tribune, A7.

<sup>44</sup> Robson, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Aird, 6.



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strong that many activists have received death threats for their work.”<sup>46</sup> Mr. Wisdom Mensah, project coordinator of International Needs Ghana (ING), an organization that helps women reclaim normal lives in their communities, is one of those who have received such threats for his work campaigning against trokosi. Anti-trokosi activists have increased global awareness of the trokosi religion, yet this awareness has served to drive the trokosi underground, thus contributing to the status of the trokosi as a silent women’s issue and making it more difficult to locate and rescue the slaves.

The increase in worldwide awareness of the trokosi issue has had one positive outcome: A vocational center run by a non-governmental organization entitled, International Needs Ghana (ING) was developed to liberate former trokosi slaves.<sup>47</sup> They are taught skills they were forbidden to learn about inside of the shrines, such as batik, tie dying, soap and pomade making.<sup>48</sup> The organization also assists the children of the trokosis in gaining an education and occupational skills. The goal of ING is to help trokosis to live normal lives after their release and to help them get jobs to support themselves. The organization’s goal is also to educate those unaware of the religion about the cruelty involved and what the girls are faced with inside of the shrines. ING, like the activists, has been verbally attacked by supporters of the religion and supporters believe ING is going against African culture. Mensah stated of the accusations by supporters of the religion, “We are not against our culture. We are against servitude, slavery, and child labour.”<sup>49</sup> However, ING has been successful in rehabilitating former trokosi slaves. After their completion in the school-like setting, they have a graduation ceremony for the girls to celebrate their triumph. Since its inception, the ING has liberated and rehabilitated 2,800 trokosi women and children.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ben-Ari, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

It seems impossible to eliminate a religion that has been practiced for three centuries. Many activists admit the fight to end trokosi is far from over, but the reality is that it may never be over. Efforts to bring religion into the public eye have instead caused it to go underground in order to prevent activists from interfering with the trokosi belief and practice, thus making trokosi a silent women's issue.

It may take much time for the trokosi issue to be resolved but in the meantime it is important to educate people around the world that slavery still exists. It is important to spread global awareness of the trokosi issue. Although this awareness could drive practitioners underground, it may also serve to prevent the religion from becoming a silent women's issue. If the religion remains a public issue, global scrutiny may result in social change in Ghana; the subsequent outcome being that slavery will no longer be tolerated there.

Humphrey Hawksley, a BBC news correspondent, describes a trokosi's unhappiness, "She hauled up a bucket from a well, spilling water on the dirt ground, and then rested by burying her head in her hands. Her rounded, scarred shoulders showed years of hard labour. When she looked up, her eyes were completely blank as if no longer able to reflect pain, happiness, or any of those basic human emotions."<sup>51</sup> Humphrey Hawksley took the following picture for an article for BBC News entitled, "Ghana's Trapped Slaves" and shows a trokosi with the priest that owns her. The picture shows the innocence of only one of the young trokosis and it also shows the disturbing aspect the religion involves. The girl in the picture is a child and yet she is also a wife, and will most likely have children by the priest. As Hawksley explains, the girl in the picture looks as if she lacks the ability to show emotion.

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<sup>51</sup> Humphrey Hawksley, "Ghana's Trapped Slaves." *BBC News*, (February 8, 2001): Front page.

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Figure 5. Humphrey Hawskey, “Ghana’s Trapped Slaves.” BBC News, 8 February 2001, Front page.

History often ignores the fact that enslaved women and children are subject to the same amount of brutal treatment – or perhaps even more – than enslaved men. Like male slaves, female slaves are beaten, but women must also sacrifice their bodies to their owners. A lack of public awareness combined with tacit local consent allows such travesties to continue. The trokosi are routinely violated while they are still children. It can be argued that they never experience childhood. An ex-trokosi slave says, “People call us wives of the gods, but we were never that. We were just children.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Robson, 26.

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